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SEPT.

1897.

ANNALS
OF THE
AMERICAN ACADEMY
OF
POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

THE SHIFTLESS AND FLOATING CITY
POPULATION.

There are three distinct points of view for the consideration of the problems suggested by the above topic. First, there is that of the social revolutionist, who traces all shiftlessness and inefficiency as well as all poverty, to the present method of distribution, especially to such social arrangements as the state, private property or private ownership of land. The views of this class may be ignored as they have no interest in the present discussion. Second, there is the conservative citizen who accepts things as they are and sees little hope for radical improvement, who infers that because we have with us always the poor, and the shiftless, and the inefficient, we may as well support them by our present methods, who responds to all pathetic appeals upon his generosity and does not begrudge a share in his surplus to the unfortunate dependent. Citizens of this type hold the key to the situation and must be converted, and, the view to which they should be converted is the third, that of the reformer who looks for radical change in the long run and who accepts meanwhile the

necessity for remedial measures. It makes a great difference to the welfare of society whether dependents shall remain at liberty to select the manner of their support, and whether young men who are not making their living by legitimate employment are to be put in the way of becoming useful members of society.

A conspicuous historical illustration of the truth that remedial measures may be effective, is set forth in the volume of consular reports on "Vagrancy and Public Charities," issued a few years ago from the Department of State. Without attaching undue importance to the opinions or testimony of any single consul, what appears to be the large lesson of the reports is clear. Twenty years ago one of the most beggar-infested countries of Europe was Germany. Able-bodied men in alarming numbers tramped through the provinces of all states of the empire; some of them in search of work, others for love of vagabondage. In 1873, 200,000 men and boys were living as vagabonds in Germany, begging from town to town, demoralizing, and, in many instances, terrifying the rural communities.*

But, whether it was because the necessity for better organization of public philanthropy became obvious in Germany earlier than elsewhere, or because it is a trait of the German character to adopt and rapidly to extend a carefully elaborated scheme of social improvement, it is there, as the Consul-General says, that the "restraint of vagrancy and the relief of deserving indigence first received the careful study and treatment which lift benevolence from a sentiment to a science."†

The steps in the prosecution of her active policy were the formation of anti-begging societies; the provision of relief stations and lodging-houses, with a system of passes from one station to another for the man who is in search of work; the establishment of labor colonies; the general adoption of

* See Consular Report on "Vagrancy and Public Charities," p. 291.

† *Ibid.*, p. 290.

some modification of the Elberfeld system for relieving private distress, and the vigorous enforcement of the penal laws which declare, among other things, that imprisoned shall be: Every tramp and whosoever begs, or causes children to beg, or does not prevent persons from begging.

What is the result? Seventeen consuls report from different cities of Germany, and they agree in testifying to the enormous decrease in begging and increase in the efficiency of the real relief of destitution. From Munich, for example, the consul reports that "begging in the streets may be said not to exist, and vagabonds and other objectionable characters are seldom seen." From Düsseldorf: "The arrangement and maintenance of stations where food and shelter are given as an equivalent for labor have nearly done away with street begging." From Bremen: "Every person caught begging is imprisoned in the house of correction or in the workhouse for a term of four months up to two years, where they have to do the kind of work or labor to which they are best adapted. They have to obey orders strictly, but there is nothing humiliating in the treatment they receive; but, on the contrary, it is tending toward the elevation of their self-respect. A part of their earnings is reserved and paid to them when leaving the institution. About twenty-five per cent of these beggars remain incorrigible and have to be repeatedly punished and imprisoned, while the rest of them become self-supporting members of society." These extracts are representative of the evidence furnished by the reports.

Contrast them with but two quotations about countries in which the conditions twenty years ago were no worse than in Germany, but in which remedial measures have not been employed. And these, also, are typical. First Sicily:

"No country, perhaps, has a greater percentage of beggars than Italy, and in no part of Italy are beggars so painfully numerous as in Sicily, where all public buildings, churches, banks, theatres, hotels, and approaches thereto, as well as streets, promenades, and

parks, are teeming with beggars, whose importunities are as constant and general as they are annoying. In fact, so numerous are they and conspicuous that one is given the impression that half the population is begging; but although begging is so prevalent, the class of roving beggars known as 'tramps' is unknown here for two reasons: one, that no Sicilian beggar has the energy to travel from place to place, and the other the certainty of the place to which he might go being as thoroughly infested and fully occupied as that from whence he came."*

From Spain:

"In this country vagrants or tramps are not controlled at all. They seem to be indigenous to the soil, growing spontaneously and multiplying. Without them Spain would be lonesome and politeness would lose its most earnest devotees. Tramps regulate themselves. They are governed by the law of demand and supply, and by playing upon the heartstrings of their fellowmen, enjoy life without its burdens. They have no notes to pay, no bills to meet, because, fortunately for them, nobody will give them credit; no responsibilities, no cares, no debts, no social standing to maintain, so, with crusts of bread and small pieces of fish, they satisfy the cravings of hunger and rest sweetly upon stone steps. A happy child of nature is the Spanish tramp. He is a model for all other tramps; a genius in his line of business, and a perfect success in his calling. Of course the great body of all tramps are professionals. Who is worthy and who is not? that's the question—nobody knows and nobody seems to care, so the tramp tramps on, becoming bolder in his demands and multiplying like the sands of the sea, while the pockets of the patient public are emptied and the people endeavor to smooth their irritated nerves; nothing is done, however, to arrest the evil."*

What is desired is not that we should attach our faith solely to repressive and correctional measures, but that we should use them in their place, and learn where they belong in the general scheme of educational and social progress. A study of the present status of vagrancy in New York City is especially instructive.

Until within a few years, the policy of that city resembled that of Spain more nearly than that of any enlightened city

* Report of Consul at Palermo.

† Report of Consul at Malaga.

of Northern Europe. Vagrants crowded to the city in vast numbers, especially in the early autumn. If unable to pay for a cheap lodging they were entertained in a free police station lodging-house. They were allowed to beg on the sidewalks and from door to door, with little molestation. What they obtained was spent largely on beer or whisky with which went a free lunch. When at the lowest ebb they sank into the stale-beer dive—and so they lived. At election times they were freely employed in numerous districts, and political influence secured speedy release from the workhouse if they happened to be arrested and committed. Under such favorable conditions, the number of the floating and shiftless steadily grew, and became increasingly dangerous.

Since the advent of the present city administration, there have been certain changes out of which it is now hoped that a general policy for grappling with the whole problem may be formulated.

I. The police stations have ceased to provide lodgings. These pest-holes of discomfort, filth and contagion have given way to a municipal lodging-house, with compulsory shower baths, disinfection of clothing, a comfortable bed, supper and breakfast, investigation of all comers and a liability to commitment to the workhouse for all who prove to be vagrants, and a return to their homes at the expense of the state for those who are found to have legal residence elsewhere, and who, in the opinion of the authorities, should be thus returned. This change in the method of dealing with those who claim a night's shelter from the city, is alone cause for a considerable amount of rejoicing.

II. The cumulative-sentences law is another long step in advance. Under this law, magistrates commit to the workhouse for vagrancy, disorderly conduct and drunkenness, as heretofore, but they do not determine the sentence. The first commitment is for five days, the second for twenty, with subsequent progressive lengthening of the term up to

a period of six months. In the case of vagrancy, however, the Commissioner of Correction, even for the first offence, is authorized to fix the term at any period between five days and six months, and through several months of the past winter such sentences were uniformly for three months. Every morning about twenty vagrants were committed to the workhouse from the municipal lodging-house and a somewhat smaller number returned to their homes by the Department of Charities at the expense of the state.

III. The new registration and election laws have made the former traffic in votes impossible. In the election of last November, although a large amount of money is supposed to have been expended—for educational work—there was practically no fraudulent voting such as was notoriously frequent a few years ago. This was partly because of the better law, partly because of police vigilance.

IV. The Raines liquor law, prohibiting the free lunch, has made life more expensive for the New York vagrant. This can hardly be said to affect the professional beggar who is willing to master the arts of his calling and to work at it persistently in all kinds of weather. Such a one can easily clear several dollars in a good day. But the genuinely shiftless and floating vagrant, who lives on a few cents and unorganized charity, is sadly discouraged by the necessity of paying for his food separately. If the provision is maintained* it will certainly make easier the task of dealing with this kind of dependent.

V. The stale-beer dives, of which Mr. Riis has given the best description, have disappeared within a very short time by the general introduction of a more effective apparatus for drawing the beer from kegs. These places were generally called two-cent restaurants. Doctored, unlicensed beer was their chief ware. Sometimes a cup of coffee and a stale roll might be had for two cents. I add a few words from the description in Riis' "How the Other Half Lives"—

* Since the above was written this provision has been strengthened.

“The men pay the score. To the women—unutterable horror of the suggestion—the place is free. The beer is collected from the kegs put on the sidewalk by the saloon-keeper to await the brewer’s cart and is touched up with drugs to put a froth on it. The privilege to sit all night on a chair, or sleep on a table or in a barrel, goes with each round of drinks. Generally an Italian, sometimes a negro, and occasionally a woman runs the dive. Their customers, alike homeless and hopeless in their utter wretchedness, are the professional tramps, and these only. The meanest thief is infinitely above the stale-beer level. Once upon that plane there is no escape. To sink below it is impossible; no one ever rose from it.”

This was written in 1890. I have it upon the same authority * that for the reason I have indicated, these dives have absolutely disappeared. There is no longer stale-beer left in the kegs, and as it was for this they came, the customers have forsaken them and the dens themselves have gone as if by magic. There remain many kinds of demoralizing and infamous places; but the stale-beer dive, the worst of them all, is no longer to be found upon the island of Manhattan.

VI. Finally, the police department last spring opened a vigorous crusade against street mendicancy. Ever since its foundation, the Charity Organization Society has employed one or more special officers to patrol the streets in search of beggars, warning those who were seen for the first time, referring them to the offices of the society or to the Department of Charities as seemed the more suitable, and arresting old offenders or any who were clearly vagrants. The chief of police has now detailed twelve men for this work. They patrol in citizens’ clothes, and their instructions are identical with those under which the officers of the society have worked. Persons who are believed to be residents and whose families are in need, are referred to the nearest office of the Charity Organization Society; all

* I am indebted to Mr. Riis for information, not only upon this point, but also on police station lodging-houses, and other aspects of the subject under discussion. Probably no one has done more to lead public opinion to sound conclusions on the evils of vagrancy and the practicability of its cure.

beggars are warned and any found begging after such warning are arrested and committed to the workhouse. A full descriptive record of every person so arrested is forwarded to police headquarters, there copied, and then sent to the central office of the society. The men detailed for this duty are carefully selected and are expected to remain in it permanently in order that they may become acquainted with the characteristics of the class with which they deal and skillful in advising those in distress as to the best way of securing the necessary relief.

This action and the closing of the police stations, both of which are of the greatest importance, should alone win for the police board of the present administration the hearty appreciation of all who care for the welfare of the city.

The committee on vagrancy of the Conference of Charities, which represents the most aggressive reform sentiment that has yet crystallized in New York City, advocated before the legislature a bill providing for a farm colony, or farm school, to which were to be committed vagrants between the ages of sixteen and forty—not for punishment but for training in habits of steady industry. This bill was defeated in the assembly on the ground that it gave too extensive powers to the board of managers; but it passed the senate and may be introduced another year. Of the ten thousand lodgings given within a period of two months at the free municipal lodging-house, fully five thousand—one-half—were to men under thirty years of age, strong, able-bodied and well-nourished. Such is the testimony of the examining surgeon who saw them nightly stripped for the shower bath. The farm colony is for such men, and the farm school and the municipal lodging-house are to be regarded as parts of one system.

The lodging-house is under the charge of the Department of Charities. When in satisfactory working order, there is attached to it a sufficient corps of investigators to report within twenty-four hours on every lodger who gives a reference

in the city. The plan contemplated by the committee on vagrancy, which has not yet been fully adopted, is that all applicants who have been less than a month without a residence shall be received and their statements investigated. For such applicants, if they are found to be truthful, the assistance of private charity is to be invoked, provided anything more than a single night's lodging is needed.

Those who have homes elsewhere are to be returned at the expense of the state or otherwise. A sufficient amount is placed by the legislature in the hands of the Superintendent of State and Alien Poor to provide for the transportation of those who live out of the state. Those who have residence within the state may be returned by the City Department of Charities. Any who have been one month or more in the city without a residence, whether native or not, are not to be received; but are to be conveyed at once to the nearest police station and detained as vagrants, not as lodgers, and are to be arraigned in court next day. This distinction between those who have lived without regular employment and without a residence for less than a month and those whose stay has been for a longer period, is arbitrary; but errs, if at all, on the side of leniency. Those who have thus been dependent for a month or more will not be worse off in the workhouse, assuming, of course, that adequate accommodations and facilities for work are provided. It is not a hardship to the individual unless the conditions are distinctly less favorable in personal comfort and in their influence on personal character. They are probably an improvement in both respects. Aside from the clear public benefit, the step is, therefore, in the interest of the individual.

Unfortunately, the lack of facilities for work in the workhouse at present somewhat frustrates this purpose, but a liberal appropriation has been made to enable the Department of Correction to occupy an additional island in the

East River where hard work will be possible. The lodging-house thus becomes a sort of distributing centre, from which some will go to the workhouse, some to the almshouse, some to hospitals, some to their homes elsewhere, some to the offices of charitable societies, and many to their own independent search for work or friends. Those for whom there is no other natural provision and who are of suitable age, would have been sent under the proposed law to the farm colony.

Such are the two general features of the plan which is urged by the committee on vagrancy for the elimination of the floating and shiftless population. In criticism of this plan, it may be said that it is clearly an advance, and that all the arguments are in favor of its further prosecution. But it is also true that it does not go to the root of the matter. Considered as a comprehensive plan for restoring to productive industry the general body of inefficient young men now vagrants—it rests upon the mistaken assumptions that the flow of population to the city is an evil, that it is remediable, that those who prove incapable in the city can be made self-supporting most easily by teaching them something about farming and thereupon transferring them to the country.

These have long been the prevailing views of a large class of reformers, but without going deeply into the matter I venture to suggest that it is useless to dissipate valuable energy in an attempt to prevent a movement of population which has shown itself to be world-wide and to rest upon necessary economic changes. The agricultural revolution which has been in progress is not finished, and it is a question whether we are not protracting the period of suffering by every attempt to induce an incapable worker to remove himself from town to country.

Workers must go where the work is to be done, and the industrial changes in progress clearly indicate that an increased proportion of the work to be done by human labor

will lie in the industrial centres either in or immediately about the great cities. The inefficient farmer may be trained to efficiency in a subordinate position on the farm as the small farms are merged into larger, but the inefficient builder, weaver, forger, machinist, furnace-man, longshoreman, garment-maker, and common laborer of the town must be transformed into the efficient town laborer at the expense of the town, in institutions teaching town trades, having in view future residence and productive labor in the town itself.

The farm school, therefore, in a general remedial scheme, should be but one, and probably the least important, of a series of correctional and educational agencies, and the goal is not transference indiscriminately of all the incapables of the city to the soil but the placing in some honorable industry of all who develop the qualities essential to success in any.

From this point of view, industrial education assumes a new importance. If in the schools we train all of both sexes in such a way that they will be able to turn when occasion arises from one occupation to another, and if we admit no immigrants save those who have acquired equal capacity elsewhere, the amount of correctional training required will be reduced to a minimum.

Taking into account the national interest as a whole, the city is a better and less dangerous and less expensive place for the vagrant than the country. His migration to the city should be welcomed rather than discouraged. If he is in the city we shall be more conscious of his existence, but for that very reason we shall be better able to deal with him. There is greater taxable wealth and, therefore, greater resources for charitable relief and for correctional discipline. The whole of the repressive and remedial work can be done more efficiently and with better opportunities to watch the results than in the country. What the conventional view amounts to is that we of the city have done our full duty when, at the expense of the country, we have gotten rid of

the greatest possible number of individual vagrants, incapables and unfortunates, adults and children. This shortsighted view must be displaced by a determination to shoulder courageously the burden of our own dependency. What is objectionable is not the return to the country of those who clearly belong there, provided they are intercepted within a reasonable time, or the restoration to farm life of any who show the qualities required in it; but the assumption that a farm training is the natural cure for the general shiftlessness and vagrancy of the city and that there is some peculiar virtue in farm life which will eradicate the in-bred disease of dependency.

An illustration of the divergence between the two views may be found in the present agitation against cheap lodging-houses. These are now and have been for ten years or more the special curse of New York City. There are 116 of them, with 15,000 to 16,000 beds. They have finally been brought under very efficient supervision. A permit is required which may be revoked peremptorily by the health board, either for a short time, until some specific violation of the regulations is remedied, or finally if the offence is serious. They are inspected twice a week. They are allowed to receive only a specified number of guests, and none except on spring beds. If a mattress is used it must be covered with oilcloth. Beds must not be less than two feet apart. Provision must be made for baths and a room set apart for any case of contagious disease. The price of a bed or room varies from seven to thirty-five cents and is generally ten or fifteen cents. The moral influence in many of these houses is vicious. An observer whose office is directly opposite police headquarters in Mulberry street and whose duty for many years has been the reporting of police news for one of the great dailies, tells me that there is no doubt whatever that a very large proportion of the more serious crime of the city is to be traced directly to the idle hours of shiftless loafers in the cheap

lodging-houses. Any measures which will bring about a change of life in the homes of these few thousands of our people, would make life and property more secure and remove one of the greatest social dangers with which we are threatened.

One of the most effective opponents of these cheap lodging-houses, Mrs. Charles Russell Lowell, does not rest content with attacking them because they are vicious and demoralizing, but goes further and draws indictment against them all, good and bad, and against all inexpensive provision for homeless men, on the very different ground that they attract the incompetent to the city. Quoting from Superintendent Byrnes, late chief of police, in a recent address before the Conference of Charities, Mrs. Lowell calls attention, as she had often and effectively done before, to the undeniable fact that the lodging-houses have a powerful tendency to produce, foster and increase crime. Superintendent Byrnes had gone so far as to say that "in nine cases out of ten the stranger who drifts into a lodging-house turns out a thief or a burglar, if indeed he does not sooner or later become a murderer;" that "thousands of instances of this kind occur every year."

In the face of this testimony, Mrs. Lowell's contention for the constant improvement of the common lodging-house by law and by strict inspection is eminently justified. The argument should rest upon this unassailable ground, that the lodging-houses in question are known by observation and experience to exert an influence for evil. But an attack upon all provision for inexpensive lodgings under conditions free from the positive evils, is a very different matter. Whether or not, for example, the splendidly equipped lodging-houses for single men which Mr. D. O. Mills is now constructing on Bleecker street will be productive of any harm of this sort, depends upon the character of the social life which develops in it. If some hundreds of young men of congenial tastes and a desire for good society,

are given an opportunity which is denied the boarder in the hall bed-room who is paying the same rates, and which is utterly impossible in the common lodging-house, then they will prove a public blessing notwithstanding their effect in drawing some men from the country.

By making men more contented in a bachelor's life they may somewhat delay marriages, and some marriages they may prevent altogether. This effect can scarcely be deplored. Since whatever views we hold on population in general, we cannot welcome an accelerated increase in that part of the population which is living at the lowest existing level. The shiftless and floating family is more to be dreaded than the single vagrant, for charity will respond to appeals on behalf of a dependent family even to the extent of providing a living for months together if the head of the family is not employed, while a single man who cannot make a living can be more easily removed to some such educational institution as that for which the reformers are working.

The Salvation Army shelters must be discussed similarly on their own merits. The objection to them is not that they draw men from the country or from smaller towns, but that the desire to bring together materials for the spiritual work of the army tempts to a very low standard of physical decency and to persistent violations of the most elementary sanitary regulations. Presenting themselves as a semi-charity, they conciliate public sentiment and make it comparatively difficult for the health authorities to apply their ordinary supervision. They have been centres of contagion in London, where, unfortunately, they do not come within the generally ample sanitary inspection. In New York City their regular lodging-houses are governed by the ordinary regulations of the health department, but no one has as yet interfered with the occasional emergency measures, such as the opening of a large audience room, in February of this year, to 1600 nightly lodgers on seats and in

aisles that were to be used the next day for an ordinary public gathering. It is a significant indication of the real sources from which such lodgers come that the number of regular lodgers in the municipal lodging-house decreased when the auditorium was opened from three hundred to about one hundred; the number at the Wayfarers' Lodge of the Charity Organization Society fell off in even greater proportion; while the average reduction in the cheap Bowery lodging-houses was found by a curious visitor to be about fifty per cent. In all these places there would have been a normal increase if the Salvation Army quarters had not been opened.

This experience is only a new proof that in our study of the homeless poor of the city, we must include not only the few hundred men and the few score of women that are at any given time absolutely without shelter, except such as charity or public relief may provide, but also the ten or fifteen thousand persons who live in cheap lodging-houses and who are homeless in the sense that they have no real home—no home ties and influences, no permanent engagements for payment by the week or month that would interfere with the cheerful acceptance, at the eleventh hour, of a free shelter which might open its doors if only for a night.

The irresistible conclusion of the most careful study will be that the fundamental difficulty is in the home and school life of the young people. The correctional devices to which some attention has been given are needed only to give society a better chance as it were to work at its social and educational problem. Kindergarten, manual training, trade schools, professional training for public school teachers, instruction in the best ways of using an income large or small, the prevention of indiscriminate charity, organized intelligent effort on behalf of individuals and families in distress, the proper care of homeless children, the study of social conditions in college settlements, the creation of public opinion by the extension of university

teaching—these are the methods which, without any desire to be eclectic and to conciliate everybody, but only with an intense conviction that our whole social problem is one, I propose as the means of eliminating our shiftless and floating population.

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New York City.